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Research into the visual composition of Australian Families. The work explores photographically the changing appearance and composition of families living in Australia today. A study taking the form of an exhibition of photographs exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Gallery from March 16 to 23, 1995 which comprises the outcome of the Studio component, together with the Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.

Abstract 2

Research into the nature of childhood thinking and behaviour. The work explores photographically the world of childhood play through structured scenes from childhood. A study taking the form of an exhibition of photographs exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Gallery from March 16 to 23, 1995 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component, together with the Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.

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Part A

AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES TODAY

Australian Families Today is a visual representation of the variety of family groups living in Australia today.

INTRODUCTION

This report is the end product of one year of work photographing Australian families. The work for exhibition consists of thirty four documentary, black and white photographs matted and framed.

Australian Families Today is a visual representation of the variety of family groups living in Australia today.

THE BEGINNINGS

As stated in my original proposal the beginnings of this project were made in 1991 when I was living in Japan. One day I took a photograph of a typical country Japanese family. PHOTO 1. In this photograph three generations are living together in one family. The eldest son remains or returns home to care for his parents and their property. He has the surety that his eldest son will do the same for him. This scene is representative of the typical Japanese family.

At the same time I was increasingly being made aware that many photographers around the world were doing work connected to the notion of family. This included *Nan Goldin*, in New York photographing her family of friends. *Nicholas Nixon* had began in the 1980's an ongoing series of work photographing his wife and her sisters. More recently, *Sally Mann* had been documenting the lives and growth of her three children. In 1992 I saw all of this work and more in an exhibition curated in Japan titled *Family Album: Changing Perspective of Family Portrait*.

These experiences made me reflect on the composition of Australian families and the great variety of family situations that have crept into our society. In Australia, the family unit strongly reflects a changing society and has little to do with the past. Even at government level what is accepted as a family is constantly changing and being redefine whereas, in Japan the family represents a tradition, a culture with strong links to the past.

I decided to represent visually the changing nature of the Australian family. My response turned into my Post Graduate proposal and so the work began, a photographic essay.

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORKING PROCESS

Inherent to my work is my definition of family as being any group of people who see themselves as a family. I took this definition through necessity. In Australia there is no standard for who or what is a family.

While this body of work isn't a sociological discourse, it does raise many open ended questions about Australian families, including the most basic question of what constitutes a family in Australia. Inherent in this is the composition and visual appearance of Australian families. My work visually embraces these issues. I feel my photographic journey into the lives of Australian families could change perceptions of what constitutes an Australian family.



Photograph 1

A Japanese Family

I photographed, family, friends and strangers and travelled to different parts of Australia looking for a wide variety of Australian families. My camera gave me licence to step into the lives of many people and with little or no prompting the story of their family began to unfold. In most cases the family took me in like a welcomed guest and shared their lives with me.

I saw my challenge as making the work both documentary yet visually exciting. In selecting the families I purposely picked a variety of families not linked to any preconceived list but to the fact that Australia has a large variety of families. The selection process was subjective. I photographed those families I found interesting, visually appealing and who represented the varieties of families in Australia.

I had no defined way for contacting the families. They came from a wide variety of sources including people I know, friends of friends and in Narelle's case, a newspaper article.

The Aboriginal families at Port Keats were selected for me by my uncle, John Leary. He invited me to the Aboriginal community where he has lived for forty years and guided me to families he thought would be suitable and would be happy to be photographed.

Looking back now on the body of work I don't see many changes in my working process. I had a clear vision of my project and didn't feel the need to change my visual approach from traditional documentary black and white photography. Early in the project I did consider different methods of presentation, for example ten very large prints taken with a large format camera. However, I quickly realised this couldn't show Australian families as I wanted them to be represented. Ten prints can not represent the variety of family groups in Australia.

The consistency in the images comes from the working process I employed. All the work was taken using a tripod and medium format camera in each family's home. This was done with two intentions. The first one was for clarity in the image. The second and more important one was that the professional equipment forced formality onto the family in the way they posed for the shot. I wasn't out to make a snapshot but a formal picture of the family. The use of the camera and the tripod forced a confrontation with all the family members.

In most cases this was not only the first time the family had been photographed using professional equipment but for many it was the first time the family had been photographed together.

The majority of family portraits taken today tend to commemorate events in the lives of the individual family members. They no longer try to use a single photograph to depict the ties that bind the family together. Photographs have become extremely simple to take and we must not forget that recently, more and more family pictures are taken with a video camera..¹

The changes that did occur in the project were more in my thinking about the work as it came together and my confidence in undertaking such a body of work. This increase in confidence is reflected in a changing structure in the photographs. As I will discuss later in the report I feel the images became looser and less structured with time. This added to the variety in the images and I feel makes the body of work stronger.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PRODUCT

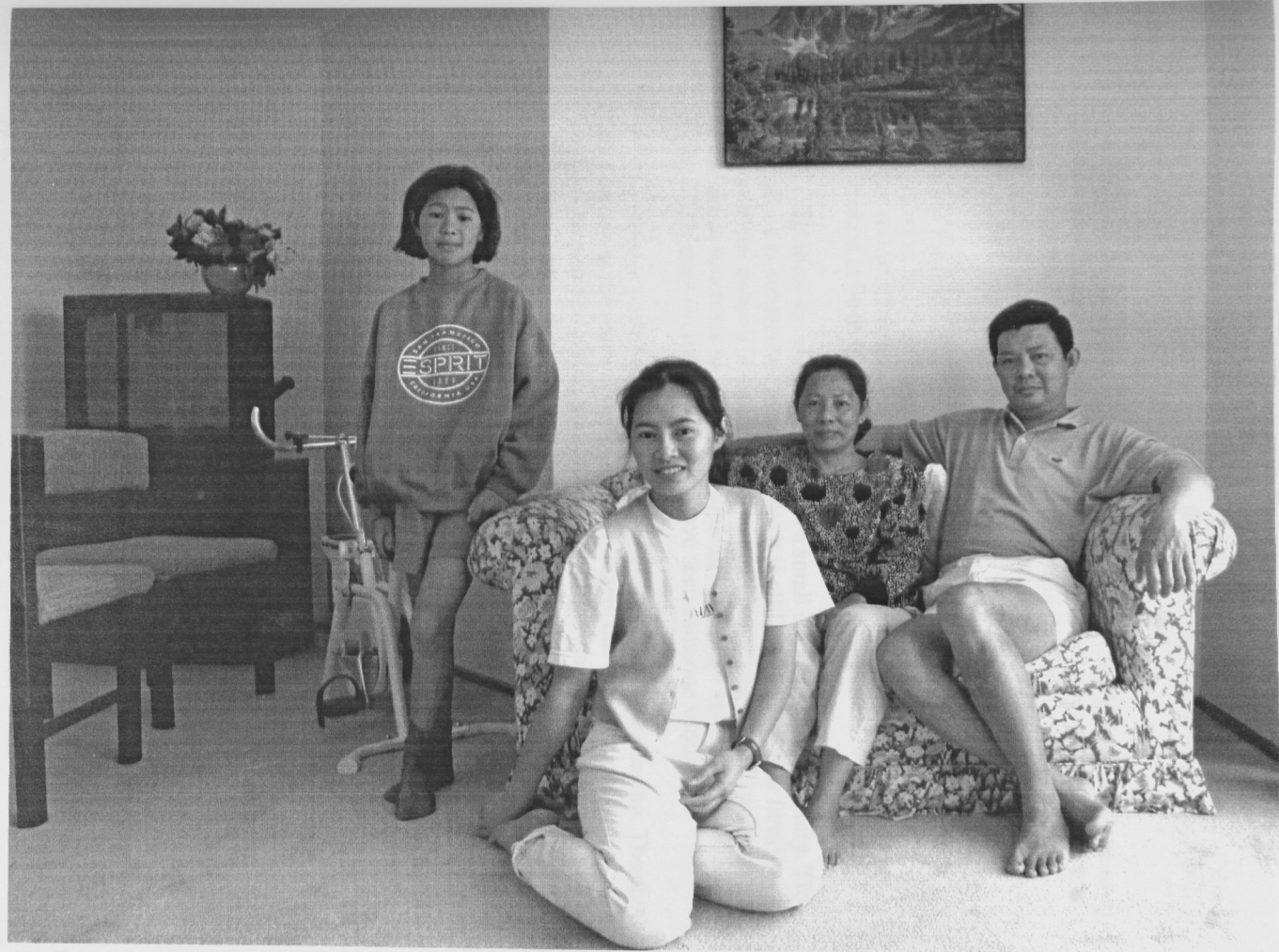
As the photographs evolved the threads of the project began to mesh. The more photographs I took, the more my style became obvious. While I knew from the beginning that I wanted the work to display a definite confrontational nature with the family, I wasn't confident how this would be achieved.

Now I see that I let each interaction be dictated by the individual situation although there are several constant factors in the construction of each image. All the photographs are taken in the family's own environment. As humans we live in buildings and structure our possessions around us in particular ways. This can add insight into our personalities. Secondly, as stated I continually used the same professional photographic equipment. This structured the family around the camera and forced a uniformity throughout the work. It forced a confrontation with the family.

The location within each home was dictated by each individual situation. Sometimes the family left this totally for me to decide, as in the *Doen* family. PHOTO 2. So I put them with their exercise bike which was in front of their Swiss painting! Sometimes however, the photograph was more orchestrated by the family. In *Narelle and Talley*, it was Talley who decided on the chairs and the inclusion of the animals, although I already selected the inside, domestic location. In most cases there wasn't actually that much choice in location. Most homes are relatively small so the places to group a whole family become limited.

In all the photographs I want the interaction with the photographer to be obvious. I feel this has been achieved. Yet as the work progressed I became looser in my approach. This can be seen clearly in the *Nixon* and *Flynn*

¹ Tokyo Museum of Photography, *Family Album: Changing Perspective of Family Portrait*, Tokyo, 1992, pp.17.



Photograph 2

Doen Family

photographs, where one member of the family is out of focus. The earlier work is more controlled. The Aboriginal families taken in the Northern Territory now look so formal. PHOTO 3. While this can also be seen as their response to a white women's camera, if I did the shots again I would probably be looser and more confident in my style.

Often in the work I have let one family member move forward alone as in the *Bell* family photograph. PHOTO 4. In other photographs familiar objects have been purposely left lying in the images. In the *Crowe's* kitchen are Beat's glasses, with the *Vanderklas family* their papers and with the Wong's PHOTO 5. their cooking pots.

I want the body of work to look like a stroll down a particular street at night, looking in house windows. In different homes you can see into different rooms. You see it as it is, except that the occupants know they are being looked at from outside and look back.

In exhibiting the work I have added a small story about each family. This information is subjective. In some cases it is all I know about that family, while in other cases it is a small bit of a much larger story. In all cases the information functions to make the people in the images real. They all exist today. You may even know them or have seen someone similar.

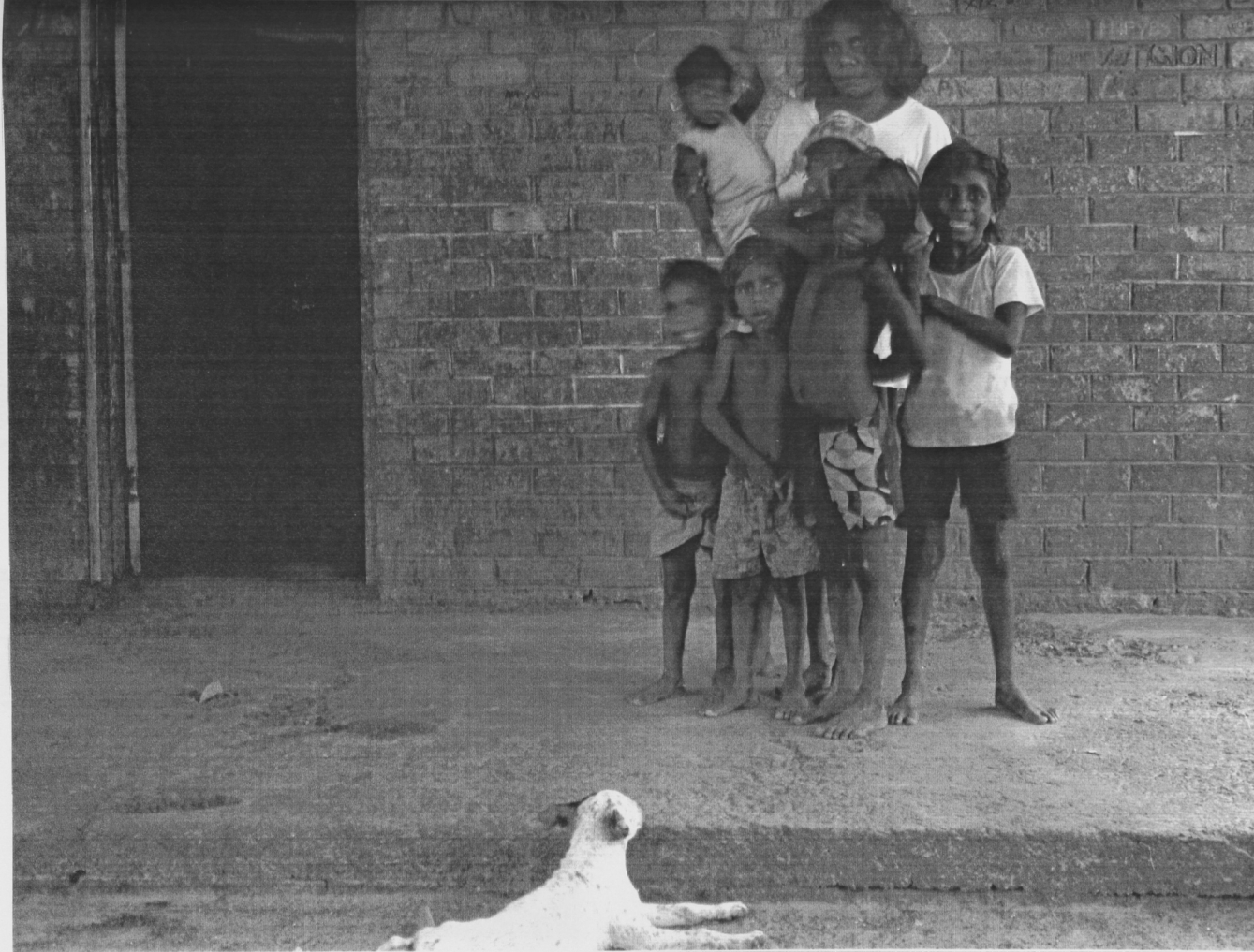
The story is positioned next to the photograph in perspex casing. Through this placement the story compliments the image, but isn't essential to the image. The perspex casing gives the text an importance above a mere gallery label. However, I don't want the story to be essential to a reading of the image. The text functions to place that family in the context of Australian families. In doing this it often raises questions that push the viewer back to the photograph, looking for answers.

In the photographs I see clearly that my personal relationships to various families are not reflected in the images. The photographs instead reflect a personal response to the camera. In different images can be seen many emotions including loneliness, sadness and happiness. The American photographer, Diane Arbus said about this,

It always seemed to me that photography tends to deal with facts, while film tends to deal with fiction.²

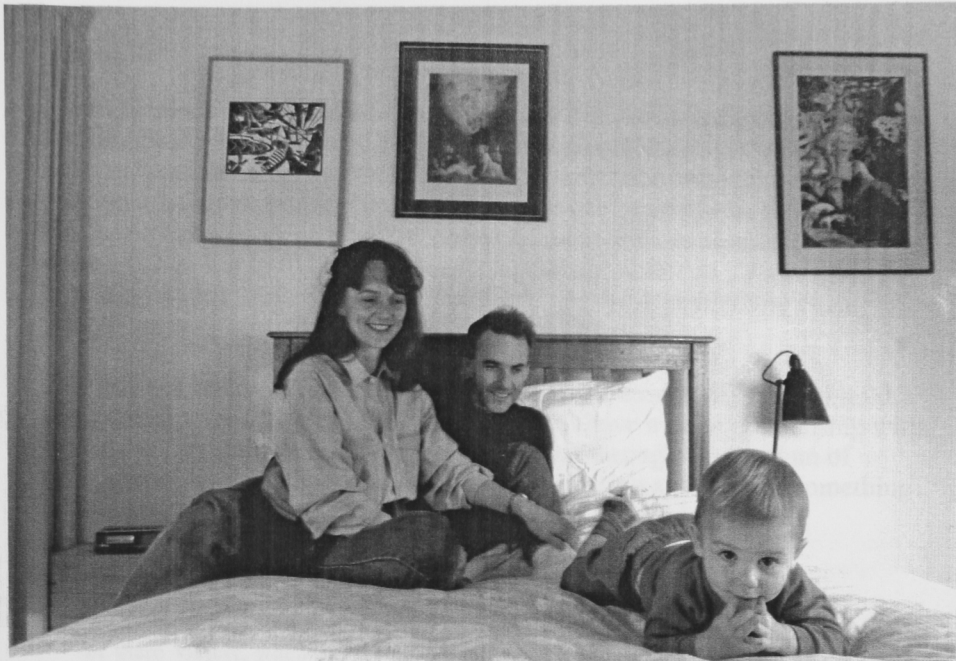
While my work doesn't address sociological issues it does however address broader theoretical questions about the nature of photography.

². Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel, *Diane Arbus*. An Aperture Monograph, New York, Aperture, 1972, pp. 6.



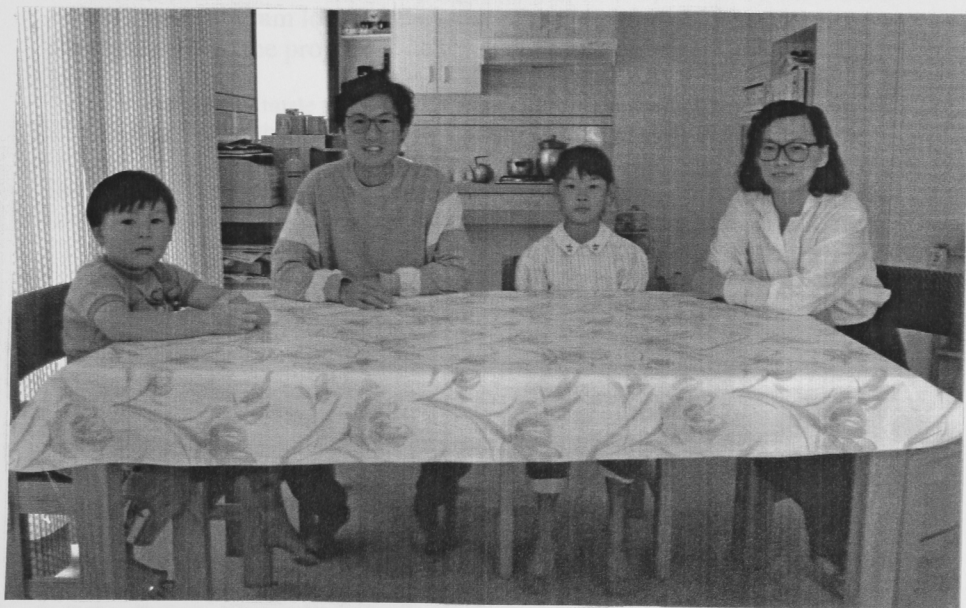
Photograph 3

Tchibururr Family



Photograph 4

Bell Family



Photograph 5

Wong Family

In his book '*La Clambre Claire*', Roland Barthes, a semiologist, sees family photography as being so filled with personal emotion that it cannot hope to be understood by others. He recalls searching through a pile of old photographs of his mother for one that expressed the image he held of her. No matter how many pictures he looked at, none of them seemed to portray quite what he felt until finally he came across one of her as a young girl. To him this was his mother. To him she would always appear young even though she was now old.

This can be true and family photographs don't necessarily need to hold any general appeal beyond anyone who doesn't have a close relationship with the subject. I would argue that artists who work through the medium of photography must go beyond this private satisfaction and achieve something with universal meaning. This is the intention in my work.

As A. D. Coleman states

When the images in a family album are not just of the private, inarticulate 'you had to be there' variety, when they bring you there instead- then the body of work constructed by their careful accumulation can become a metaphor for the lives of others, a paradigm of the human condition.³

I am also interested in what *truth* is capable of being told in a photographic image.

In a series of four television programs entitled, '*Opening Up the Family Album*', one program looks at the truth of the photograph. For one photographer in the program

There is no ultimate truth. You can only trust the surface of the photograph. I'll know forever that behind that surface there can be all sorts of interpretations.⁴

In the same programme, the British photographer, Jo Spence describes the family album as a complete construction, a battle to maintain false images.

However, in a recent *Photofile* Paul Carter takes another view, stating that

The visual rhetoric of the photographic is so persuasive, it is widely mistaken for a representation of our reality.⁵

For me the possible truth or accuracy in a photograph lies in between these two extremes. Sydney photographer William Yang explains this well in talking about the photographs he has taken of people.

³ A.D. Coleman, *A Photography Critic's Writing, 1968-1978*, 1979, pp. 165.

⁴ Graham De Smitt, "Opening Up the Family Album", *Ten 8*, Number xxxiii, pp. 65.

⁵ Paul Carter, "The Only True Picture. Autobiography and Photography", *Photofile*, No xxxi, pp.40.

They are not candid photographs. The people are all conscious of the camera, yet they are themselves as if they are posing at being natural.⁶

While I don't see my photographs as exploring the dark reaches of the families I do see them as an accurate representation or opinion of the family. While the families may be posing they are recognisable as themselves. Individually they present a view of each family in their domestic situation and as a whole they present a view of Australian families today.

This opinion or accuracy that my photographs are capable of telling comes from both the physical workings of the camera plus my internal intents and experiences. As Carol Armstrong says in a recent article about Diane Arbus

her photographs are produced by the subtle interactions that occur between her and others, rather than seize the chance interactions and by meetings between the internal reproductive workings of the camera, on the one hand and the equally internal process of what Arbus calls her identify on the other.⁷

This is what I understand to be the decisive moment. The coming together of the physical capabilities of the camera with my internal intentions as an artist.

⁶William, Yang, "I ask Myself, am I Chinese?", *Art and the Pacific*, Vol 1, pp.89, 1994.

⁷ Carol Armstrong, *Biology, Destiny, Photography*, October 66, Fall, 1993, pp29-54.

PART B

CHILDHOOD SERIES

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the second body of work submitted for my post graduate study titled Childhood Series. This body of work was commenced as a group of black and white photographs at the beginning of the year for inclusion in a group exhibition. After the exhibition I continued to work with the ideas and it became part of my post graduate study.

In an ongoing series of work I am exploring photographically how children think. The work poses questions about the behaviour and thinking of children. Through constructed photographs these questions are forced onto the viewer. The work uses as reference points my own knowledge and interest in children plus the work of other artists, novels, and film.

The work presented for exhibition consists of 12, 16x20 inch colour prints.

DETAILS OF THE WORK AND WORKING METHODS

Childhood Series questions the behaviour and thinking of children through the deliberate posing of children in staged settings. The questions which the images raise are then pushed on the viewer. The photographs explore childhood behavior and questions the knowledge children bring to their games.

The work for exhibition is photographed using a medium format camera on colour print film. In this ongoing exploration of childhood the images are staged. The lighting, location and children's expressions all play a crucial part. Some of the works use props more obviously than others.

Because I am an adult reflecting on and exploring a time now long past for me this work is also about memory. As Sally Mann says about her work with children,

'Memory is the primary instrument, the inexhaustible nutrient, these photographs open doors into the past.'⁸

To achieve this feeling the settings I have chosen are all slightly otherworldly. None are immediately identifiable. Yet they are also the settings that children are likely to inhabit, structuring small spaces as they strive to make sense out of the larger world.

The colours in the twelve prints on exhibition are the colours we remember. Strong colours of blue, red and green. When I began this series I wasn't as concerned with the colours as the imagery. In fact, the first six works in this series were printed in black and white. However, increasingly colour has become important in the images. The colours are enhanced by the clothing and objects in the photographs. I collect the clothes and objects and keep them until I need them for an image.

While the photographs work together to raise questions about the nature of childhood, for me each photograph has been structured to question specific aspects of childhood behaviour. I acknowledge that other interpretations are also possible.

The *Boy with the Broken Mirror* is a child hiding his eyes and thinking that no one can see him. PHOTO 6. This is a behaviour typical of young children. A child can magically move from the visible to the invisible simply by putting up a barrier to the world.

⁸ Sally Mann, *Immediate Family*, Aperture, New York, 1992.



Photograph 6

Boy with Mirror

In the preparation of this work I don't slowly work up to the final print like many artists. Instead I go to work like a craftsman, working continuously on the work. The bulk of work is on reaching print and every time I reach that point I go back and forth, working continuously on the print. The body of work is an ongoing

But then as in the other works the meaning becomes deeper. The symbolic mirror talks of that space that children inhabit. By blocking his eyes it defies the viewer the right to come closer. We wonder what can he see? What is he doing behind that glass? His face tells us it is enjoyable. We look into the mirror to get hints but get pushed back. We imagine another face as we stare into the triangle of light.

Girl with a Dead Bird refers to a child's interest in small living and dead animals. The girl is cradling the bird as if it is alive. Any minute she will throw her hands up and it will fly away. Yet we know it is dead.

We look into her eyes and are confronted. She is staring past us into that far off distant space where the distinction between life and death becomes blurred. The time of childhood when death hasn't the finality we know as adults. She is able to cup the bird in her hands and push her life into it's wings. We look at her, the bird and her hands,, even the space around ,but we can't enter this thinking-

In *Boy Dreaming* a child is playing with his doll PHOTO 7. The doll looks more alive than the child. What are they doing in this space? Where are they? We can only guess. As adults we can look into the space, even find it. But there is no part for us in this game. It is a closed circle. There is a similar theme in *Boy with a Red Heart*. PHOTO 8.

Girl in a Chinese Dress. PHOTO 9 refers to the adulthood of child's behaviour, the sexuality so often inherent in child's play. The edge of the bed is blurred as our eyes move up to the knowing sexual prowess of a young girl draped across an adult bed. While this photograph more than the others anchors the viewer, with the bed and bed light the viewer wonders at her thoughts as she stares at us through a knowing veneer.

In *Doll Pieces* a girl is playing with three broken dolls. The objects have the eeriness that children often find captivating. The dolls almost look as alive as the girl. They all belong in a child's game. Similarly in the photograph of the girl sitting in a circle of dolls. She looks up and sees the viewer but there is no invitation in her look. This is a closed circle.

My sister and I had our own particular way of treating our dolls: they could speak and reason, they lived at the same rate, and in the same rhythm as ourselves, growing older by twenty-four hours every day: they were our doubles.⁹

In the preparation of this work I didn't slowly work up to the final prints like many artists. Instead I have been more like a craftsman, working continually on the prints. The body of work is an ongoing

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, New York, Penguin, pp.10.



Photograph 7

Boy Dreaming



Photograph 8

Boy with a Red Heart



Photograph 9

Girl in a Chinese Dress

process. I shoot work, print it, evaluate it, then move onto another image. In selecting the final twelve works for this show I actually went back to some earlier work as well as including very recent photographs. The final selection was made from many prints.

Technical considerations are important to me in this work in as much as they enable me to use varying depths of field, lighting conditions and lens to achieve my images. Because the images are preconceived it is important for me to have mastery over the equipment, so I can achieve the effects I want. It is the technical considerations along with the colours, lighting, location, child and props that all combine together in the final image.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE RELEVANT CONCEPTS AND CONTEXTS INFORMING THE WORK.

Grown-ups don't understand anything at all about us. ¹⁰

What exactly does it mean to be a child? Is it, that children are not capable of adult thinking and making meaningful sense of their existence? Or is it that children are capable of everything but simply need adults to provide the basic physical needs of food, shelter and warmth. Perhaps the caring structures we put around children are just an adult invention to keep children in a state of dependency.

This body of work is concerned with exploring the thinking and behaviour of children during childhood. The work probes the question of being a child. Purposely posing the children I am raising questions about how they play and what are the motives in this play. How much of what children do is a game and how much is intuitive?

My first degree is in Early Childhood and I have both taught young children and lectured at tertiary level on child development. Obviously on an academic level I have both knowledge and interest in children's thinking and behaviour.

However, I see the work going beyond mere childhood theory.

One of these first influences on me photographically was the American photographer Emmet Gowin. As a teenager I used to continually return to the library to examine Gowin's photographs of his family members. Even now almost twenty years later I am still continually drawn to these images. Gowin takes his life, his immediate family and

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, pp. 56.

surroundings and through his camera draws us into the images. His style forces the viewer to explore each image and personality.

Sally Mann is one of the most recent photographers to work with children. She uses a very large format camera with limited depth of field in her Immediate Family Series. She says she is

Spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story, sometimes we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death and beauty. ¹¹

Although using her own children to tell her story, many people have found these photographs confrontational and sensational. Could it be a threat to the adult invented state called childhood?

It is interesting that literature doesn't shy away from the thinking and behaviour of childhood. There are innumerable books where adults clearly remember back to their childhood- a time of clear mature thoughts. So clear, in fact that whole books have become the basis for this thinking. Simone de Beauvoir says in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*,

The condesention of grown-ups turns children into a general species whose individual members are all alike. Nothing exasperated me more than this. My personal tastes were not dictated by my age. I was not 'a child'. I was me, myself. ¹²

At seven years of age she thought it was her gradually developing powers of imagination that made the world a darker place.

More recently the Chinese author Jung Chang wrote her life story in *Wild Swans. Three Daughters of China*. Her mature thinking at a very young age enabled her to remember and internalise thoughts that she would many years later use to write clearly about not only her own family's history but also the history of China.

My own observations must also be included as a source of inspiration in this work. Although I have no children, many of my friends have children. Intelligent adults often seem to be manipulated by their offspring. As someone who is still contemplating having children these observations leave me wondering.

¹¹ Sally Mann, pp.5

¹² Simone de Beauvoir, pp46.

Concluding Thoughts

The most obvious results from my year of Post Graduate study is the completed work.

However, the real conclusions stretch far and wide, many of them fairly intangible. Some of them I will list below.

I researched photographic issues and theory more thoroughly than ever before to find a context for my study.

I was challenged to think more clearly about the issues involved in my work.

I was challenged to think more clearly and discuss the issues involved in other artists work.

I was also challenged by having to present my thoughts and work to an open forum for discussion. I found this made me return to my work and reevaluate my processes and thinking.

I learnt to use a computer, not only to type this report but also to manipulate photographs.

I met and talked with a variety of other artists .

I was exposed to the work of many other artists both in exhibitions, lectures and books.

I functioned as a post graduate student in an art school.

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All the children I use in my images.

Ian Jones.

My friends, especially Geoff and Claire Bell and Julian Stevenson for their help and encouragement.

POST GRADUATE STUDY PROPOSAL 1994

APPENDIX 1

AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES TODAY

My major area of study this year will be a documentary representation of Australian families..I will investigate by photographic images the present composition of real families living in Australia today. Through the images many facets of Australian families will be visually represented. These will include various relationships between family ,racial backgrounds and relationships between families and their home environment.The body of work taken together will,through cross reference provide a precise visual account of both similarities and differences in and within families and display many changes in Australian families in the last 30 years.

RATIONALE

As a nation,Australia has experienced many social changes since the Second World War. Changes in migration patterns,marrying age,childbirth rates,etc. All factors that become represented in family structure.

My interest in this study was nurtured in Japan where I lived from 1989 till 1992. I became aware that the families around me were often large with a number of generations living together.The ethnic composition was totally Japanese and similarities between families obvious. Although the Australian mass media still usually insists on depicting the family as two parents of different sex with two or three children, the reality is far from the truth.

This kind of visual study has never been done in Austrsalia. In fact, the family has been greatly under used photographically as an indicator of Australian life. Some photographers have however,used their own families in their work including *Olive Cotton*, *Max Dupain* and *Haarold Cazneaux*. *Gerrit Fokkema* included family groups in '*Wilcanna*', and is also working on a body of work about his own family.

WORK METHODS

I intend to photograph between 40 and 60 families with the final exhibition consisting of at least 40 prints. As a visual artist I am not interested in a sociological breakdown of different families, but a visual representation of the variety of family groups existing around us today.

For me the challenges in the working process revolve around my interaction,as a photographer with my individual families. I am not interested in taking myself out of the image but with creating an interaction between me and the family members. Rather than "seize the chance interventions" the photographs will be dialogues between me and the family in their surroundings.

This dialogue will then transfer to the viewer with the help of a small written caption.

Taken together, the body of work will tell the story of contemporary Australian families.

TIMEFRAME

I have began my project and will continue working on it all year. I aim to photograph at least one family each week until October, when I will begin printing exhibition prints, writing captions and framing the work.

RESEARCH

This involves contacting the families and making the necessary photographic arrangements. I have also been researching articles about the interaction of the photographer and the subject.